DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 433 402 UD 033 090

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TITLE The Politics of School Choice in British Columbia: Citizenship, Equity and Diversity.
PUB DATE 1999-04-00
NOTE 24p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Educational Research Association (Montreal, Quebec, Canada, April 19-23, 1999).
PUB TYPE Reports - Research (143) -- Speeches/Meeting Papers (150)
EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Citizenship Education; Diversity (Student); Elementary Education; *Equal Education; *Fine Arts; Foreign Countries; *Magnet Schools; *Political Influences; Politics; *School Choice; Urban Schools
IDENTIFIERS *British Columbia

ABSTRACT

This research explored the politics of educational choice through a case study of one public school testing the limits of difference in the British Columbia (Canada) school system in the 1990s. The Fine Arts elementary school was created by the school board based on pedagogical ideas from teachers. This fine arts magnet offered teachers a great deal of input into decision making. Parents, students, and teachers, who wanted the school to be more distinctive as a fine arts school, were described as promoting a "private" school in the public system. According to some community members the magnet school was "private" because it restricted admission to students who were particularly talented or motivated in the fine arts, was more selective in hiring teachers, and insisted on an integrated fine arts curriculum across the subject area. In an effort to keep the school "public," they called for admissions to all, a curriculum useful to all students, and a policy to hire any qualified teacher. As this school was established, there was an implicit conflict about the meaning of equity. The school might be considered elitist because families with more energy, ability, or knowledge might have less difficulty in using a school outside their neighborhoods. It might, however, provide opportunities for those who would have been denied them, resulting in more equal opportunity. The prevailing view of equity in the public school system is likely to meet similar challenges in the future. (Contains 24 references.) (SLD)

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ED 433 402

The Politics of School Choice in British Columbia: Citizenship, Equity and Diversity

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April 1999
AERA, Montreal

School choice has been described as a tool for all reasons. The politics it represents is many different things for many different people; the problems it is supposed to solve are not well defined. The frame that is put on the problem, however, will determine the kind of response that is elicited, and the kind of evidence that researchers look for. There is no single correct frame, and they do get interconnected in important ways, but in this paper I want to use the lens of how the state provides for diversity to discuss school choice in Canada. It is a frame that is particularly important in Canada, and it is one that has too often been ignored in favour of a discussion of markets.

Market arguments for school choice emphasize improving "quality" in education. The evidence for the impact of markets on quality has been sought primarily in students' test scores, and the evidence is mixed. In this framework, equality means giving everyone the same information, the same formal ability to make choices and the same opportunity to improve their performance. The measure of schools' worth is their ability to produce academic achievement. But if schooling is a democratic institution with broad social goals in relation to developing citizenship, market metaphors are limited in their applicability, and test scores are not an adequate measure of goodness. The evidence for evaluating arguments about the moral and political role of schools must be found in the political debate and in the nature of the school communities which are formed.

In political theories about school communities, the key question becomes the meaning of the "public" in public schools. Through schooling, the state both creates and reflects a public community and provides in various ways for diversity in that public community. Examining what the arguments are for diversity and for equity constitutes one way of understanding the issue of school choice.

There is a great deal of evidence that the social communities formed by schools, rather than the strictly academic outcomes of schooling are of interest to parents (Gaskell, 1996). Parents choose schools as much on the basis of the other students and families who are there, as on the basis of test scores (Bulman, 1999; Fowler-Finn, 1993/4). They worry about the social relationships their children will form, whether they will be happy, whether they will be safe as much as about their grades. Even American black families, who suffer most from poor neighbourhood schools, often choose to remain with their friends rather than integrate in a predominantly white school. (Wells and Crain, 1992). School decisions are usefully seen as cultural decisions about community, not just economically rational decisions to maximize test scores.

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Although an emphasis on culture and community is not absent from the global debate about school choice (Davies and Guppy, 1997), it is particularly appropriate for understanding the debate in Canada, where most educational issues are immediately translated into issues of jurisdiction and governance. Canada's public schools have always afforded institutional recognition of difference. Our constitution has protected provincial jurisdiction in education, and substantial amounts of public money go to private schools and to religious schools in several provinces (Shapiro, 1985; Wilson and Lazerson, 1982). There is no single shape to the public system. As Riffel, Levin and Young (1996) point out, schools have been a central place of struggle over issues of diversity, and the present forms of provision represent compromises arrived at historically, and still under constant scrutiny and challenge. In Canadian policy literature, social capital matters as much as economic capital (Jensen, 1998), recognition of difference matters as much as social cohesion (Taylor, 1992; Kymlicka, 1998).

There is an educational literature on school choice, which focuses on the citizenship role of schools, but it is too daunting to summarize here. In "postmodern" society, common narratives of the nation and of citizenship break down. New organizational forms with less formal means of control, decentralization, new communication patterns, mobility, media and the fragmentation of identities challenge any stable narrative of citizenship means (Wexler, 1991). Eamon Callan (1997) argues that liberal democracy needs to ensure its "public culture" through having schools teach a cluster of habits, desires, emotional propensities and intellectual capacities that maintain democracy through, among other things, "a respect for reasonable differences and a concomitant spirit of moderation and compromise." This he calls "liberal soulcraft." At the same time, societies must provide for pluralism in their educational institutions. To agree that liberal democracy requires a distinctive education for liberal virtue leaves much room for disagreement about which schools adequately teach it, and which institutional arrangements are most likely to produce it.

There are many who argue that the existing public schools are already teaching "liberal soulcraft" in the best possible way, and that increased diversity and choice in the public school system would diminish its power. Jim Head, president of the OTF, for example, argues that the public schools teach a "Canadian ethic" and "basic educational tenets or even certain ethical or civic considerations" that are fundamental to Canadian democracy and present in all schools. He goes on to argue that choice would fragment the Canadian public and stratify students, undermining the public schools' commitment to civility in the face of difference and mingling across class, gender and race lines. Barlow and Robertson (1994) also argue that developing a broad capacity for citizenship is the primary mission of the public schools and go on to say that a comprehensive neighbourhood school is the place where democracy is learned (also Dobbin,).

Arguments about equity are central to this view of how schools develop citizenship. Students with different backgrounds should be brought together so that they learn about each other, which suggests a comprehensive education for all. Differences among schools will create inequality, because schools cannot be separate and equal in a society where cultural differences still exist within a vertical mosaic. Choice, even within the

public domain, diminishes the ability of the schools to create diverse communities where all are served equally and where difference is used to educate students in civic virtue.

Citizenship arguments for increased choice within the public school system are critical of the present state of democratic education in the public schools. For example, Bruce Wilkinson (1994) agrees that "What is at issue is not just academic skills; but young people's attitudes toward work, work associates and family, their civic and social responsibilities, their cultural values, and the entire philosophy that will be their foundation over the rest of their lives." But he describes existing Canadian public schools as "value neutral" and "bureaucratic", rather than engaging in powerful citizenship education. Because of this, in a pluralist democracy, parents should have the right to send their children to schools with values that are compatible with their own, instead of to some neutral institution, which is afraid to take value positions. Mark Holmes (1992) argues that public schools are already highly differentiated because of the communities they serve. "There can be no retreat, without enormous social upheaval, to a common, comprehensive school." Pluralism is a social good, adding to the intrinsic richness of life and preventing authoritarian regimes. The state must officially accept pluralism and extend it, allowing people "to decide for themselves the kinds of subcommunity they wish to live in, if indeed they wish to live in a community at all."

And the argument for equity by those in favour of more choice is that recognition of diversity enhances equity (Taylor, 1992) Kymlicka (1998) points out that Canada does better than other countries in assimilating immigrants, despite public concern about fragmentation and balkanization. Concerns about fragmentation are unfounded, and the common school cannot be equally hospitable to all, whatever its comprehensive and liberal character and values. For example, "A series of studies has consistently concluded that integrated schools in Toronto are inhospitable for Caribbean Black students because of the low numbers of Black teachers and guidance counselors, invisibility of Black authors and history in the curriculum, the failure of school authorities to crack down on the use of racial epithets by fellow students, double standards in disciplinary decisions, and the disproportionate streaming of Blacks into dead end non-academic classes. Among the consequences are rising drop out rates and reinforcement of the feeling that success in white society is impossible." (Kymlicka, p.84) The argument for pluralism here is an argument for recognition of difference and an equal chance at learning.

Government policy frameworks across the country vary in how much they promote diversity within the public schools. Most provinces allow local boards to make decisions about what kinds of schools to offer in their jurisdiction, and this has not been particularly controversial. Ontario's Royal Commission on private schooling (Shapiro, 1985) accepted the premise that the goal of schools "is to develop, nurture and enhance the intellectual and moral autonomy of the young," and that "schools can contribute to the strengthening of the social fabric by providing a common acculturation experience for children." Based on these premises, it recommended changed provincial guidelines that would increase provision for alternative forms of schooling under the general guidance of the existing school boards "in recognition both of the rights of citizens and of the general

value of diversity." The argument did not find political support in Ontario at the time, either from the public boards who would have their mandate extended, or from the private schools who would be strongly encouraged to form agreements with public boards. In Alberta, experiments with charter schools (Bosetti, 1998) seem to have moved in some of the general directions recommended by Shapiro. BC's debates about funding traditional schools (McLaren, 1998) have brought out many of the arguments about increased diversity of provision by boards, with increasing anger on both sides.

Research on school choice in Canada needs to focus on how local boards make their decisions, and move beyond claims by those who are 'pro' or 'con' choice to represent the one correct position on democratic citizenship and tolerance. A more useful question than whether school choice is "good" or "bad", is how decisions are made about the limits of choice within a public school system and what factors are significant in understanding what those limits now are in different jurisdictions. Jane Jenson's (1998) discussion of the policy literature in Canada points out that too often calls for social cohesion focus on individuals, and not on institutional arrangements, and on inculcating common values, while ignoring claims for social justice and recognition. She calls for research on how public institutions manage conflicts over recognition, and how they provide space for democratic dialogue. Drawing out the conflicting arguments and interests around school choice should allow them to be more fruitfully understood and engaged.

The Methodology

My research has focussed on the decisions that school boards in B.C. have made about providing for difference in secondary education and on the consequences of those decisions for teachers and students. I am trying to understand why boards support or fail to support creating increased differences among schools, and what it means for teaching and learning. The intent is to provide information for school boards that are wondering in which direction to go, and to inform parents who are wondering what and how to advocate. At a broader level, the analysis contributes to an understanding of the character of the 'public' school. My experience has been that there are lots of experiments going on in the public school system, but there is little reliable knowledge about how they work and why. The stories of these schools, and these boards, deserve more attention.

The research tries to look closely at the social forces that affect the diversity of provision in B.C. schools at the moment. I am looking at public school boards as the place where debate takes place, for in B.C., the legislation gives the responsibility to make the decisions to boards. I try also to look at the consequences for teaching and learning, for this is ultimately what matters to students, to teachers, to parents and to the larger public. I find the issues enormously complex, and the research interesting precisely because of the appeal of conflicting arguments. The schools that have agreed to cooperate in the research have been most hospitable and interested in the dilemmas.

I have studied three districts with somewhat different views on diversity of provision. One encourages diversity and choice, decentralizing decision making and encouraging

difference among schools. The second is firmly committed to neighbourhood schools, and to having each school be as much like the others as possible. The third tries a mix, encouraging diverse programs, but within a district framework of neighbourhood schools.

In each district, I have carried out interviews and observations at the district level and in one secondary school. Superintendents, trustees, administrators, parents, teachers and students have been interviewed. I have gathered documents, and carried out observations in the school and at the board. Interview tapes were transcribed and coded using NUDIST. A school report has been written for each district. All quotations used in the school reports were given to those who spoke to get their permission, and draft reports were discussed with each school. Each district study has taken a year of research and writing. This time consuming local process allows me to have confidence in what is reported, and it provides information for the community in exchange for their time and involvement.

In each district, I have concentrated on the effects of the policy framework at one school. In districts one and three, the schools have been distinctive schools, encouraged by the board to be different. In the third district, I have looked at a school which had to change to become a neighbourhood school, similar to the others. In each case, issues around the nature of the curriculum, the selection of teachers and the selection of students become key in understanding why some want more diversity, and others resist it and in understanding what happens to teachers and students in schools.

In this paper, I deal only with the district that is committed to increasing choice, focussing on the experience of its fine arts school. Fine arts schools have become relatively common in the U.S. as magnets, or as charters. But in B.C., it is unusual to find such a school within the public system and the debates about the school reveal why. In this paper, I will discuss the origins of the school, and explore the debate about difference in the curriculum, the teachers and the student community. In conclusion, I will look at some of the implications for the arguments about the nature of the public school in Canada.

The Provincial Context

The framework for school choice in BC was created in 1970's by a Social Credit government. It decided to partially fund private schools out of public money (Downey, 197x) and to set up a College of Teachers that licenses all teachers in the province. All teachers are members of the BC Teachers Federation, which bargains with the provincial government over salaries. Working conditions have been bargained at the local level. Provincial curriculum frameworks set out what all schools must teach, and examinations take place in academic subjects in the final year of high school.

Today, the NDP (social democratic) government defends the existing framework. The Minister is against relaxing or tightening provincial controls on schools and against allowing charter schools, voucher systems or other forms of "choice". The minister says that the quality of public schooling is high, that choice already exists since private

schools can get public funds, that local districts can bargain with teachers and decide which alternative programs and how much diversity they want to offer. Although the opposition Liberal party seems to want more diversity, the present minister is feeling no political pressure to increase the options. "The balance is about right," he told me. The ideal the minister conjured up was the neighbourhood school in his electoral district, where the daughter of the local doctor went to school with the son of the shopkeeper and the daughter of the carpenter and they all learned to get along together.

The BCTF does not think the province should be funding private schools, and is worried about the increasing diversity that seems to be occurring in the public schools. The organization has developed a provincial framework for evaluating alternatives, which approves them as long as:

1. They will be based on sound educational pedagogy.
2. The full provincial curriculum will be in place.
3. There will be equal access of all students to the benefits of public education.
4. All schools will have an equitable share of educational resources.
5. Students, parents and teachers will be entitled to participate in discussions and decisions where appropriate about the philosophy and curriculum of their public school system.
6. There will be prior discussion and agreement of those directly affected, in the case of school-wide alternative program, the school staff, parents and students attending the school, the local teachers' union, the unions representing other workers employed in the school or district.
7. No advisory or governing body will have the right to impose particular secular or religious interpretations on students or teachers, or to ban or to impose texts or learning resources.
8. All teachers will have the right to participate in discussions and decisions about the philosophy, curricula, pedagogy and organization of their school, both as colleagues and as members of the school community of parents, students and teachers.
9. Organizational arrangements and teaching conditions will be consistent with collective agreements in effect in a school district.
10. That schools will continue to offer an array of programs reflecting the diversity of the school population.

The concerns here are about the curriculum and pedagogy (1, 2, 5, 7, and 8) about equity for students (3, 4, 10), and especially about teacher involvement in decision making (5, 6, 7, 8 and arguably 1) and collective agreements (9), which are a form of teacher involvement in decision making. Deciding whether these conditions are adequately met is a matter of some controversy, but in practice it is decided at the local level, between local teacher organizations and the local school board. The BCTF prefers comprehensive programs that serve a neighbourhood, but will not fight them actively if the local supports them. Other models bear a burden of proof, but the debates are to take place at the local level. It is therefore at the local school board level that the battles around school choice take place.

Creating Difference: Starting a Fine Arts School

The Fine Arts school in this study was begun in a mostly white, English speaking community with an average income above the provincial average. It is located an hour's drive from Vancouver and includes a substantial agricultural land reserve. The superintendent believed in and pushed hard for decentralization and school based management. He encouraged alternative forms of schooling for every community.

> I believe clearly in moving the decisions as much as is possible to the people that have the most information to make the decisions. ... I don't believe that people out there are malicious or that they want to screw up the system or sabotage or anything else. You can trust the people at the school level. They want to make the best decision that they can. They know the student population, they know the parent population, and they know their staff a lot better than I would, sitting in a corner office. So, if you have some faith in them, then it seems to me that you should allow them to be able to make decisions. (superintendent)

The board supported his view, without much dissent. They agreed not to "mess with the trains" because, as the superintendent put it, "we can't do our job if you're doing it.". The board hired the superintendent, and reviewed his performance yearly, but gave him plenty of latitude, setting broad goals rather than dictating specific policies. School based management was well accepted.

> We probably have about 20 little communities and within each little community you have an idea and each community is different. And so when I say I hope that all of our schools are alternative programs, it's because each community is different. Each community has different needs and that's why it's really important for everyone in that new school to be involved in setting goals. Students, parents, community, businesses, everybody has to be involved because you're trying to agree on that school. (board chair)

The local Teachers Association was not nearly as enthusiastic about school based budgeting and alternatives as the administration (Calvert, 1989). Part of the disagreement is philosophical. The notion of different kinds of education for different students "runs contrary to what we think public education is—it's the same service for everyone. Anyone who attends is entitled to that base level of service and assistance." There was a fear that the new school would draw an elite, and that it would impoverish the fine arts teaching in other schools, by drawing away the most talented students and teachers. Opposition to decentralization was also based in the union's desire to protect teachers' working conditions. "We have to maintain the standards. We fought long and hard for standards for the teachers in the public schools." The new school was likely to want to change student/teacher ratios, class time, preparation time and so on. Moreover, teachers were being drawn into management decisions about budget: "It's an extremely uncomfortable procedure to take part in. To have to decide whether some equipment is more necessary for the school than a few hours of clerical time or other support staff or

perhaps a few hours of the music program. Those are not the kind of decisions that we want to get into."

As a result, negotiations about class size and working conditions have been "pretty tough" in the district. The superintendent wants to protect the schools' room to manoeuvre, while the teachers want to keep the schools similar to one another and protect teachers from pressure to teach on difficult schedules or with large classes. The collective agreement is long and complex. One hundred and eight pages set out mandated personnel practices, working conditions, professional development and provisions for educational change. Hiring is designed to protect the rights and working conditions of continuing teachers and to ensure equal opportunity for all teachers in the district. The maximum school day is 6.5 hours and preparation and lunch times are required and clearly set out. Class size maximums for different kinds of instruction are specified.

With his belief in decentralization, the superintendent encouraged new kinds of programs and new kinds of schools. He described himself as "throwing out" ideas, to see if there were any "takers". In the case of the fine arts school, there were. The superintendent asked a district administrator who had extensive experience in the arts to write a proposal for a fine arts elementary school. This administrator became the major advocate for the school. He put together a 10-member committee of educators, including an elementary principal, two music teachers, a drama teacher, a visual arts teacher, two parents (a music specialist and a visual arts specialist) and a professor from the Visual and Performing Arts Department at the University of British Columbia. The superintendent was an ex-officio member, "because it's important that he understands what we're doing and why we're doing it." The committee was a workable size, and it represented administrators and educators who were knowledgeable about fine arts schools across the country.

In this environment, the committee developed a proposal for a school where the fine arts would be "equal partners" with academic subjects. The proposal was based on the view that the public schools did not give enough attention to the arts, that all students suffered from this, and that talented, artistic students suffered the most. The new school would share all the ideals of the BC school system in relation to the intellectual, personal, social and vocational development of the student, but it would add an emphasis on the arts, as an end in itself, and as an aid in developing other abilities. "From this will come a school environment in which in depth experience with the fine arts becomes a fundamental way of knowing for its students. Experiencing the arts will become a part of everything that goes on in the school." (Original proposal, p.31)

The board accepted this committee's proposal. The teachers' federation was not enthusiastic, but did not block the proposal. It was taken to community forums to determine student and parent interest. Here concerns about equity and curriculum surfaced, but were not strong enough to derail the proposal.

> There was some kind of underground concern on the part of other schools in the district because they thought we would siphon off all the top kids. We anticipated that. We had very good parent response. They asked a lot of good questions. For

> example, they wanted to know how does it fit into their students' academic needs and is there a balance there. So we answered a lot of these questions and for the most part put people at ease that we are very concerned with academics and in fact the two fit together. They are very complementary if you teach accordingly. Our goal was to use the fine arts as an integral part of the curriculum . . . like music could be a context area, for example, of the social studies, or even parts of science and certainly of language arts. (district administrator)

The concerns about equity, and about academic curriculum were signalled, but there was enough interest, and enough central support, that the school received approval and enrolled students. It added a grade every year, until it included a full secondary program in 1995. It has survived and prospered, but the limits of its distinctiveness are constantly being challenged and discussed.

The Limits of Difference: The Public and the Fine Arts School

How different can a school be if it is run by a public school board and is subject to a district wide collective agreement and the provincial curriculum? There have been struggles around the meaning of the 'public' in the public school at LFAS. Concerns about how the school operates are often phrased in terms of this being a "private" school. The key issues are the nature of the curriculum, student selection and teacher selection. In each debate, people around the school reflect on whether the difference in this school threatens the promise of equity, and the experience and understanding of difference that the public school should promise. The result is a compromise: those who founded the school are concerned that their vision has not been realized because of the demands of the public system; some current students and teachers continue to describe LFAS as a 'private' school within a public system.

Defining the curriculum: fine arts and academics

The school was designed to teach a distinctive curriculum, one that integrated the fine arts across every subject area and made them "equal partners" with traditional academic subjects. At the same time, the school would deliver the provincial curriculum, covering language, math, science and social studies, and displaying a commitment to critical thinking across the board. There have been many tensions around how distinctive the curriculum should be, and what it means to have a curriculum that will serve all students.

The mission statement says that this is a school for "students with a passion for the fine arts". The words "focus" and "choice" are on the lips of the principal. "School can't be all things to all people." He also argues that the public sector needs to expand and change, responding to new demands in the community. "If we don't do it the private sector will." At the same time, most of the goals he articulates are the same as any other school. His background is in science, not in the fine arts.

> "I'm hoping that a student who leaves our school is someone who is literate, someone who can read with understanding and will read a variety of materials... I

> hope they have numerical skills. I also hope they're thinkers and I put a lot of time into higher-level thinking activities and having students look at things from different points of view. I think it's important for them to be critical thinkers, to be able to take a look at something, analyze what is going on, and synthesize things in a meaningful way." (principal)

The school must work within or around provincial guidelines that give a primary place to traditional academic subjects and leave limited time for the arts. The more widely accepted value of traditional academic subjects, and the fact that they are provincially examined and the fine arts are not, creates many obstacles to achieving equality between arts and academics and to integrating the two. Examination results are made public, and all are aware that parents watch closely.

> We're looking at assessing whether or not we're able to provide quality education for things like chemistry, English, history, the academic areas.

Both academic and fine arts teachers agree that academic results count heavily because they matter for entrance into post-secondary education.

> If they don't do well on their provincials then they're not going anywhere as far as universities. So I'm very concerned about that.

> I still say that bottom line: if those kids can come through the Fine Arts School and it shows a really poor rate of graduation, that is going to say something about us that I don't think we want said.

The debate about how to integrate the fine arts more fully into the curriculum took place mainly among teachers. Some wanted to 'enrich' the existing curriculum with fine arts, while others wanted to 'transform' the curriculum with fine arts. The first group wanted to add a more extensive fine arts program to the standard curriculum, while the second group wanted to change every subject area by integrating the fine arts. The first group was relatively happy with the existing curriculum, while the second group had fundamental misgivings about the way most schools taught students and the priority given to traditional academic subjects and "the assembly line".

The fine arts group felt they were the revolutionaries who wanted to make a real difference.

> We were the people who wanted to break the frame; we did not want to live within the little confines of the frame.

Other teachers saw these demands as quite unrealistic and unbalanced. Students needed good academic training to go on to postsecondary education or to jobs. The academic level of the school would be judged by its performance on provincial examinations. Even in a fine arts school, it was wrong to downplay or change the traditional curriculum. One teacher describes the teachers who wanted to "break the frame":

> The fine arts were everything and to hell with the academics and everything else. You know, that may be putting it a little too harshly but the times and the allotments of things that they wanted was unrealistic.

Added to this philosophical difference was jealousy about resources, working conditions and status. Fine arts teachers tended to get the "bouquets and thank-yous". Emotions ran high.

> We've had some pretty good debates. It's amazing how emotional, what kind of emotional response and philosophical response was elicited. It's surprising. People carry this stuff close to their hearts.

> Whatever I said, or other people who had a similar vision to me said, I felt that we were aliens, because the others did not understand. They thought we were being totally idealistic.

The school still contains competing visions which emerge at critical points in the year, for example when students need extra time to rehearse for public performances, or when the timetable is being negotiated for the next year.

> My own personal opinion is that academic subjects just have to take priority and so that's my bias. So I side with that faction of the school that argues this point consistently.

But things have become more amicable over time. Some teachers have left, some have changed their views, and agreements and understandings have been forged.

> Now. . . I think we have taken sort of a common denominator, a survival path. We couldn't merge the two, so what's happened, one group has updated some of the ideas and gotten in touch a little bit more with what some of the rest of us want. And the rest of us, who had a higher ideal for it, have come down. We have sort of reached a moment of common denominator. It's a good learning experience for me. . . I really felt like sticking it out because I really believed in what was happening.

> You accept it and say OK. We've got a good thing going regardless. It's better than anywhere else.

The compromises that were made over time between the two groups of teachers have created a curriculum that is traditional in many ways, but makes the arts compulsory, and provides more time for them and less time for the traditional academic subjects than would be found in other schools. There is still not a great deal of integration of the fine arts with the traditional academic subjects. The construction and reconstruction of the timetable from year to year has been an attempt to find a balance among subjects, not an integration of different subjects. Anxiety about instructional time, examination results

and the employability and postsecondary admission of graduates has led academic teachers to keep their own focus traditional. "It's hard in physics, to make it artsy... I mean sometimes you just can't do it. There's just too much to cover in the course." (teacher)

The staff has agreed that the curriculum should be "student-centred", a view that accommodates the "break the frame" arguments of the fine arts teachers, but also reflects the views of many BC public school teachers. There is a great deal of student-to-student discussion and instruction and an informal atmosphere that the students find supportive and encouraging. The emphasis is on coaching, on critiquing performance, and not on lectures and memorization. The school's curriculum has not changed as much as the founders would have liked, and there are some who told us the school is no longer "really" a fine arts school. But the curriculum is different from other schools in the district. It requires a fine arts major and minor; it provides less time for the other academic subjects; it offers fewer sports programs and more artistic performances. It does not have the amount of help for students with learning disabilities that other schools have. This distinctiveness, muted as it seems to some, becomes the focus of arguments about whether the school offers an equal, or an "elitist" education.

Selecting students: equity and elitism:

The question of which students attend the school and why has been at the centre of discussions about how LFAS is a "public" school. A public school is open to all students and emphasizes respect for difference; a "private" school chooses distinctive students. LFAS has been characterized as both.

Selecting "the right kind of children [for] the school" was central to the original committee's proposal for a fine arts school. The document states:

> Applications for admission to the school will be considered from all children entering the grade levels offered. The school will not be limited to those who have manifested exceptional ability since it is not in keeping with the school's objective to provide an advantage exclusively for those who already have had particular opportunities.....In general, students will be selected from those identified by their teachers, their parents, or themselves as enthusiastic about one or more of the fine arts. Parental and student interest and commitment will form the primary component of the selection process. (Original proposal, p. 27)

And finally,

> Academic achievement of applicants should indicate the student is working at or close to district norms in the areas of reading, language arts and mathematics. However, where a prospective student is under-achieving in a regular school setting, serious consideration will be given to waiving this requirement given the success of a Fine-Arts environment in stimulating this type of student. (p. 28)

The original proposal suggested an audition for students. But the school has never selected students based on their achievement, in fine arts or in traditional academic subjects. Every student in the district is able to enroll, on a 'first come first served' basis. Some feel this has undermined the ability of the school to be a first rate fine arts school.

> The original intent of the LFAS, as outlined in the proposal, was to enroll students who wish the fine arts to be a major focus and an integral part of their education. The administration has basically ignored these guidelines-- and allowed students to enroll on a first-come basis, often with very little attention or priority given to students' needs within the fine arts. The question "Will the curriculum and environment of LFAS be to the benefit of a student?" was often not considered. Over the years, many students were accepted without question in order to fill classes. (parent)

But others describe this openness as the very basis of a public school.

> They point out to me that this is an alternative program, it is a different school. And I point out to them that it is a public school and difficult students have just as much right here as any other student. They may have problems, but we deal with the problems. We don't just send them to another school. (principal)

Any student in the district can attend this school; there is no local catchment area. The school has tried to provide information about its program to families in the community so that an appropriate match between student and school might be made. To begin with, teachers across the district were asked to recommend students who might benefit from the school's program, but this ended because of complaints from teachers. Preadmission interviews to ensure parents were aware of what happened at the school were instituted, then stopped, and then begun again. The school describes the interview as an opportunity to clarify that there are required fine arts classes, fewer vocational options, fewer sports programs, less time in academic subjects, less learning assistance time available at the school.

> Parents are told absolutely categorically that they do not get quite as much academic time, therefore they must not waste time. You know that when you come in. The students and parents are told it. And if the students do not have enough interest in the arts to accept that, they should not be here. It is as straightforward as that. It's no good fighting against it, and saying well, "we don't get enough." It's a tradeoff. (administrator)

The admissions policy and what might be said at the interview still causes some concern.

> It has come to our attention that students were screened and those with lower grades were discouraged. I don't know how this was done. We've seen memos from the principal that tell parents that learning assistance is not available at LFAS, so that if they have a student who needs some additional help in learning, they should look elsewhere. (teachers federation representative)

The original vision was that this school was not for everyone. And that difference is translated by some into "elitism".

> I think the parents treat it, some parents treat it as almost a private school. (teacher)

> There's an attitude out there that we're an elitist school. (principal)

But others believe that difference means it provides equal opportunity by serving a group of students who are not well served in the larger, comprehensive schools.

> I think there are, quite frankly, many students in this school who would not survive in another school, or would be buried in another school. That's in the sense that they would be shoved at the back of the class and wouldn't utter much, or they would be students who would be teased and just ostracized by their peers.

> It's the kids who feel ridiculed, awkward, not appreciated by their peer groups who are looking for other kids like the ones they find at our school.

In fact, students attend the school for a variety of reasons and as a result there is considerable diversity among the student population. A number of families who live nearby treat it as their neighborhood school. Others make active decisions to send their children, taking into account more than the fine arts.

> My children are not athletic kinds of children. They're creative and shy sorts of children. . . [We] kind of thought that an artistic enrichment might be a nice idea for them. I did not want French Immersion particularly as an enrichment and this seemed like really the best alternative.

Some parents see the school as a "safe haven" from the drugs and violence they describe in other, larger schools.

> It's small, it's positive, it's got a purpose, it's got a clear direction. We don't seem to have the discipline problems that other schools have. (teacher)

The school counselor observed that two things motivate students to come to the school,

> an interest in the arts or they've run out of alternatives. They've tried two or three different high schools; they haven't been successful so let's try the Fine Arts School. It's a small school.

Socially, the school is seen as more accepting of difference than other schools. The arts are linked to freedom of expression. One grade 11 student who had only recently arrived at LFAS expressed the opinion that:

> Lots of the people here wouldn't fit in, in a normal school, that's why they came here. . . . It's another chance.

Numerous people observed that the students who attend LFAS are "different." But far from breeding insularity and like-mindedness, this seems to encourage respect and learning across difference.

> ... I think that we need to be .. very careful not to fall into that elitist trap; to do what we can to prove to the community that we're not anything like that. I'm sure people have told you about some of the difficulties with parents that don't want any behaviorally disturbed kids here, and think this is not a school for learning disabled, and we only want academic kids that find the academics easy so they can cruise along in the academics and then spend all of their time doing their fine arts. Well, we're not a private school and I really don't believe that public funding ought to be offering that. (principal)

Students who came to LFAS during their secondary career say they were greeted warmly by other students when they first arrived and felt accepted very quickly.

> When I came last year for my first day of school, I had people coming up and giving me a hug and saying I must be the new student and they would show me where my classes were. . . . All new people are greeted with open arms here.
>
> The people in this school have respect for each other. Their respect allows me to respect them in turn. In some senses, we are almost like a family.
>
> In other high schools I am led to believe a grade 8 student would not dream of speaking to a grade 11 or 12 student, Although here it is not like that at all. They all-they're almost like a family. (teacher)

The school appears to attract some resentment and expressions of antagonism from some students at other secondary schools. In the time we were in the school, windows were broken by a small party of snowball-throwing students from another school, and students reported other incidents of "anti-Fine Arts school" feeling.

> I think [X] high school is jealous of us (student)
>
> [Students from the local high school] call them down because they are not tough and they have a different focus on life. (teacher)

One student sums up his view of what the school tries to accomplish, in contrast with other district schools:

> Opening my mind to other people's opinions and ideas and ways of expressing themselves. Sometimes if you look at art, it's like looking at the person. You see

them in the painting. . . It's all part of communication. If you can't understand somebody then everything breaks down.

There is not a lot of pressure to conform at LFAS. Every student interviewed emphasized that it was important to "be who you are" and pointed to diversity among the students.

> This school allows me the freedom to be myself without pressure from cliques or social groups. (student)

> Being at LFAS has been the best experience of my life so far. Here, I feel as though I have the freedom to express my emotions and feelings. I can be the person I want to be here, without anyone to criticize and attack my personal beliefs. In other schools, I had to assimilate to the way they were. Here, I am myself. (student)

The school counselor summarizes the pervading ethos of tolerance and difference in the school.

> I think here there is tolerance for whatever. If you want to wear 49 earrings in your left nostril, you can do that. You really can. Or if you want to wear the most unusual hat, feel free, no one will comment on it in a negative way. When I say no one, I don't mean to be quite so general. But you have enough support that even if someone does comment in a negative way, you're okay with it. There are real opportunities here to try out different ways of being and still be accepted.

> They've got some self-esteem in place that may not have been there had they been the ugly duckling. You know, picked upon, put down for being this goofy arts kid in some other institution.

The school is seen by many, including some in the school, as "elitist" because students apply for admission. As one administrator at the school said, before coming to LFAS, "I viewed it as a very cliquey and elitist school." In response to accusations of elitism, the school tries to be very clear about its open admissions policy, to accept students from different backgrounds, and to affirm the values of accessibility and accepting difference. The school emphasizes its "public" character to counteract accusations of being "private".

Teachers: the collective agreement and a distinctive pedagogy

The original proposal for the school, which involved only the elementary grades, was premised on attracting flexible teachers with particular strengths in fine arts. It outlined three requirements for teachers:

> Teachers selected for the school will need to combine specialization in a fine-arts subject with successful classroom experience in other areas of the elementary curriculum.

> Teachers interested in teaching in the school should indicate a willingness to participate in the amount of planning that will be necessary to develop a curriculum in which fine-arts components become an integral part of everyday school life.
> Prospective teachers should be interested in the integration of community arts resources into the program and flexible enough to accept scheduling changes that will inevitably result from the arts activities of the school. (original proposal from school, p. 29)

The fine arts mandate provided a rationale for an exceptional school, not just because it added fine arts, but because it created a small alternative school with flexible, successful teachers committed to community outreach. Parents found the prospect very attractive. Others described it as a way to create a private school in the public system.

To have a school staffed by flexible and energetic teachers is, however, difficult. Hiring is constrained by the judgements of those making the decisions, the availability of such teachers, and the collective agreement, which sets out priorities for hiring. Creating a school culture that sustains and supports such qualities is equally a challenge.

Staffing was contentious from the beginning. Although there were some provisions for input from the original committee, hiring was done by the first principal. As the school opened, some members of the original committee were already disillusioned by the staffing decisions that had been made: "some of them are travesties and some of them are mistakes." They felt that the board was hiring teachers who were not committed enough to or knowledgeable enough about the arts. They felt that for this unique school the board should negotiate an exemption to the hiring practices outlined in the district's collective agreement. And they felt the board was still treating the arts as an extra instead of a central requirement, not having high enough standards for hiring in the arts and, particularly, hiring teachers in the academic areas who were not knowledgeable about the fine arts.

> Just because I can play the piano, does that mean I can teach music?
>
> I acted for the Langley players, that doesn't mean I know anything about drama in terms of educational issues.
>
> Then it gets right down to the business, [that] writing and language arts and spelling are more important than fine arts and that's not good enough for the school.

When LFAS grew to include the secondary grades, the staff at the junior secondary school were given the choice of moving to a larger, newer secondary school not far away, or staying on. A substantial group stayed, for a variety of reasons.

> I did not want to go to the new school myself. . . my prediction was, since [students] are interested in the fine arts, they also have a interest in foreign languages because of the cultural aspect of fine arts.
>
> I like the small-school environment, where the teachers know the kids so well.

Because of its rapid growth and some turnover in staff, the school has been able to hire new teachers every year since it started. The principal looks for candidates with "a strong commitment to caring for children, a commitment to the school philosophy, expertise in subject area, an ability to work with parents, and a desire to be part of a team." However, it is difficult to insist that a qualified applicant share the philosophy and beliefs in the school's mission statement. The district teachers association worries that the school will draw the best fine arts teachers from other schools, leaving them impoverished. The collective agreement with teachers sets out clear procedures for posting and filling jobs, making seniority and subject specialization key issues. Teachers in the district have priority, and about half of those hired have come from other schools in the district.

The other half are new to the district, and they have to be certified by the College of Teachers. In the area of the fine arts, this has caused some concern, because teachers need an undergraduate degree with coursework in academic subject areas. In areas like dance, there are few undergraduate programs, and some of the graduates do not have the required courses. This means there are few qualified teachers, but professional dancers cannot be hired.

Hiring is done at the school level after applicants have been screened at the district level. A school-based administrator and representatives of the teaching staff interview applicants, but the decision is ultimately up to the principal.

The result of these decisions is a staff where some have come specifically to teach at a fine arts school, and others have come or stayed for other reasons: the availability of a position, or the small size, location, atmosphere, or challenge of the school. This "mixed bag," as one teacher put it, is a source of irritation to those committed to the original vision:

> Some of them are wonderful teachers, but they are teaching at the wrong school. They are not at our school because of their beliefs; they are at our school because it's their job. Some of them are left over from when the school was a junior secondary school. Some of them are there because of last year's contract negations and the seniority issues, and very few of them are there because they are arts-oriented and definitely have a love for the arts and want to see that integrated in the system.

Teaching is not an occupation that usually encourages professional debate and collegial decision-making. Teachers have tended to make decisions alone, in their own classes, behind closed doors (Lortie, 1975; Little & McLaughlin, 1993). Professional autonomy is central to the status and respect teachers want. But in this school, collective decisions

about philosophy, curriculum and students were central to the conception of the school. Disagreements were forced into the open, with, at least among some, little sense that a compromise would do if the school was to retain its distinctiveness.

> In a fine arts school you have to have like-mindedness or else creativity can't come. You can't have someone who is just going to push a physical education program and competition, when we are saying that creativity is the most important part of the school. .

Working out the difference has involved leadership and compromise, concrete changes in the timetable, lots of discussion, and a spirit of working with difference that has come to pervade the school. It has not been easy. These teachers have had to debate some fundamental issues about their practice, and have not covered up the divisions that exist.

> Last year we made a huge mistake saying that the arts will come first; if a student has to get ready for a performance, let them do that first, and they can come back and make up their academic work later on. Doesn't work. . . (teacher)

> It upsets me quite a lot to think that our students may not be able to compete just simply because they don't have enough time in class and also because they spend so much time in the arts. (teacher)

The result is a balance that respects the professional autonomy of subject teachers, within a renegotiated timetable and an overall mission. There is no consensus, but a balance that teachers and staff can celebrate and work within.

> People are going to believe what they are going to believe and you know you can do very little to change someone's very deep-seated values and beliefs. So there are some people on staff that believe that academics are all-important and some people that believe that fine arts are all-important. I think I would venture to guess that most people in the academics department believe that there is value in the fine arts but just think that it has gone a little bit too far in terms of the time allotment. . . Well, we talk about it all the time. . . The problem is that you can't make everybody happy and that is the bottom line. (teacher)

A strong sense of professional autonomy eventually takes precedence. When asked to identify to whom they saw themselves accountable, most teachers at LFAS named themselves.

> I have very high standards for myself as a teacher and what I want to do with kids. ….. I don't usually come up to where I want to be in my own evaluation and my teaching.

> Personally, I feel accountable to me. That's it. . . I have to do what I feel is right and I have to go with what I believe.

The principal comments that

> They are very possessive of their kids and of their territory and, rightfully so, they are very proud of their programs.

This kind of professional, subject based autonomy coexists uneasily with a model of decentralized decision making where parents are supposed to have a strong voice. The parents press for a fine arts focus and for accountability for teachers. The principal again ends up mediating, recognizing the legitimate demands of the parent community, and defending and protecting teachers. "I think the days of educators, of the process of education being mystical and being done by the experts, I think those days are gone." (principal) Parents and administrators do not have the ability to get rid of a teacher for anything other than demonstrated incompetence, though teachers might choose to transfer if the school becomes an uncomfortable working home. The collective agreement spells out the formal processes for evaluating teachers in a fair amount of detail. Established teachers are evaluated on an as-needed basis, whereas new teachers are evaluated yearly. All reports on the work of a teacher must be in writing, each report shall be based on a reasonable number of observations, (a minimum of three and a maximum of six), and the rights of the teacher to dispute the evaluation are described. These guidelines are in place to protect teachers against unfair assessments.

The workload at the school is substantial, because of the time demands of meetings and extracurricular activities. The collective agreement negotiated at the board level constrains the timetable options, with the aim of ensuring that local school pressure for flexibility will not create unfair working conditions. Classes cannot go too late or start too early. Preparation periods must remain in large blocks. Some teachers appreciate the constraints; others would like to be able to be more flexible. In an attempt to squeeze in as many options for students as possible and to respect the contract, the timetable was changed every year for the first several years. The current system is semestered, with 65-minute periods, the same schedule being repeated each day. A few courses are offered beyond the regular school day, by having teachers come early and leave early, or in one case having a teacher go home for an extended break over lunch.

The staff lacks the clear consensus on the importance and meaning of fine arts across the curriculum that was envisioned in the 1985 document. Creaming off the "best" teachers for this school, the hope of its founders and the fear of the teachers' federation, has been constrained to some middle ground, protecting the 'public' nature of the school. Creating new modes of work has been constrained by the collective agreement, and by the professional autonomy of teachers in their own subject areas. Teachers can move relatively easily from school to school in the district, while LFAS strains towards a clear view of how teaching there should be different from teaching in other schools.

Conclusion

This research explores the politics of educational choice through a case study of one public school testing the limits of difference in the Canadian, and more specifically the

British Columbian, public education system in the 1990s. The scope and content of democratic decision making and collective bargaining determined the amount of difference the school could achieve and therefore the amount of choice that was available to families in the community.

The Fine Arts school was created by the school board, based on pedagogical ideas that came from teachers, and offered teachers a great deal of input into decision making. Its curriculum emphasizes respect for others, individual autonomy, and critical thinking. In all these ways, it is a most traditional 'school of choice'. It fulfills the philosophical requirements of "liberal soulcraft", meets the guidelines of the BCTF around curriculum, teacher involvement and equity; and is not the creature of a group of parents who want a particular kind of schooling for their own children. But many still argue the school has gone too far in compromising its public character and limiting its appeal to a select group of students. Concern about the school is as prominent as celebration in the rest of the district because it represents a trend towards difference, and away from comprehensive neighbourhood schools.

In this district, parents, students and teachers who wanted the school to be more distinctive as a fine arts school were described as wanting a "private" school in the public system. Being a 'private' school meant restricting admission to students who were particularly talented or motivated in the fine arts, being more selective in the hiring of teachers, and insisting on an integrated fine arts curriculum across all subject areas. The 'public' part of the public school was represented in three pressures: the pressure to keep the curriculum of use to all students, the pressure to open admissions to all students, and the pressure to hire any qualified teacher, and allow them to make their own professional judgements about how to instruct students.

This is the meaning of 'public' in education in a particular time and place. It has not always been so, as the history of Canadian education attests, and it will change in B.C., as provincial governments change, as superintendents change, as the organization of teachers changes. A particular set of social forces in B.C. at this time have made issues of formally equal opportunity for students and teachers central; the value of creating different kinds of environments for different students has much lower priority. The push towards the 'public' has been a push towards representing diversity inside a neighbourhood school with the same formal structure. It is striking that the question of how tolerant the school climate is does not have the same prominence as the shape of the formal curriculum, for it is hard to measure, while the question of how well students do on academic exams is precisely measured and of interest to more people. The argument about the 'public' is an argument about similarity of treatment, not about how well this school, or any other, actually teaches students to be autonomous, or to respect diversity.

In the discussion between the founders and the critics of this school, there is an implicit conflict about the meaning of equity. The difference that exists is described by some as elitism, because families with more energy, ability and knowledge to choose will be attracted to and able to attend a school outside their neighbourhood. Others see creating difference as providing a 'safe haven' for those who do not function well in large,

comprehensive schools and thereby providing them with an equal opportunity that they would not otherwise have. Recognizing difference can be seen to undermine or create equity, depending on the politics that surrounds it. Moreover, the prominence of equity as a value in the debate is due in large part to the teachers' federation, which has made it a central issue in their guidelines about choice.

In the debates this school confronts, it is tackling some of the most pressing issues on the agenda for public schooling today. While the political balance in relation to school choice might be "about right", as the Minister said, the educational balance can only be examined by getting close to the educational process at the school level. The public school system in its present form is very structurally conservative, very unlikely to take risks with difference (see also Cusick, 1983). It has a strong mandate for a particular view of equity, which will be challenged and tested by further social movements for diversity and choice.

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